



**Concerned Health Experts Investigate Roots of "The Clean Plate Club"**  
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Concerned that too many Americans are lifelong members of the “Clean Plate Club,” experts at the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) have investigated the uniquely American compulsion to finish everything on the plate. Ironically, the notion of the “Clean Plate” was originally introduced as an incentive for Americans to *conserve* food, not gorge themselves on excess calories.

Being told to “clean your plate” has been a familiar rite of American childhood for decades. Seven out of ten Americans surveyed (**69 percent**) say they **finish their restaurant entrees all or most of the time**, regardless of the entrée’s size. This passive approach to portions extends into the American home: **30 percent** say they base the amount of food they eat on the **amount they are served**, while 42 percent say they determine their portions by the **amount they are used to eating**.

In 1917, President Woodrow Wilson created the U.S. Food Administration, headed by Herbert Hoover, which was tasked with assuring the supply, distribution and conservation of food during the war. Hoover and the Wilson administration firmly believed that “Food will win the war,” and promptly began to devise campaigns to decrease the nation’s food consumption.

One of the most successful encouraged Americans to sign pledge cards in an effort to save food. One such pledge read, “At table I’ll not leave a scrap of food upon my plate.

And I'll not eat between meals, but for suppertime I'll wait." The "Clean Plate" was looked upon as the patriotic ideal for the nation to follow.

The U.S. Food Administration was terminated soon after the end of World War I, but the idea surfaced again in 1947, spurred by the aftermath of another World War. When the U.S. launched the Marshall Plan to help rebuild a war-ravaged Europe, President Truman called upon the country to eat less poultry as a way to save food for "thousands of starving Europeans." In response, Clean Plate Clubs formed in many of the nation's elementary schools; this seems to be the first usage of the full phrase we know today.

"There was more to those first Clean Plate Clubs than clean plates," said Melanie Polk, RD, Director of Nutrition Education at AICR. "The goal of the program, after all, was to avoid wasting food, not to encourage overeating. That's why the clean plate message was always paired with another message, one that's gotten lost in the shuffle: 'Don't put more food on your plate than you will eat.'"

But as portion sizes have steadily increased in the country's restaurants and homes, Americans have been reluctant to let go of the idea that a clean plate is a good plate. The solution, according to the AICR experts, is a more mindful approach to eating.

According to an AICR brochure called *The New American Plate*, one way to regain perspective on portions is to spend a few minutes with a measuring cup. The brochure advises readers to fill a measuring cup or spoon with the USDA standard serving size of a favorite food and empty it out onto a clean plate or bowl. Simply by doing this once or twice, AICR says, individuals get a mental snapshot of what a single serving of that food really looks like. Many will be surprised to learn, Polk said, that the bowl of cereal they eat every morning contains twice or even three times the servings (and fat, and calories,

and sugar) than they realize. Armed with this knowledge, a person can gradually make appropriate adjustments in mealtime portion sizes.

If your weight has been slowly increasing, take the initiative. *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*<sup>TM</sup> can provide additional practical strategies to help you control portion size and prevent weight gain. Call your local Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for additional guidance.